

PALACE POLITICS IN THE DAMASCUS OASIS

Syria's Equilibrium, as of This Writing

RAY ALAN

CROSSING the Syrian frontier anywhere is always a little hazardous. True, it is only near the Huleh armistice line that one risks being shot at; but Syria's relations with her Arab League "sister states" are often almost as tense as with Israel. Syria does not maintain diplomatic or consular relations with either Lebanon or Jordan and, coming from Beirut or Amman, you apply for a visa at the frontier itself—which may be closed to all traffic in both directions for forty-eight hours or longer, as the result of a sudden order by the Syrian authorities wishing to put pressure on neighbors.

Since Syria holds the whip hand, she generally gets her way. Lebanon, the *entrepôt* of the Levant, and dependent for much of her food on Syria, is pitifully vulnerable: when the Syrian frontier is closed, goods pile up in Beirut and the prices of meat, bread, and fats double in Lebanese markets. Jordan, since the rebirth of Israel, has been obliged to import almost all her requirements through Beirut and Syria. When border difficulties with Syria interrupt the transit of essential supplies the economy of the synthetic kingdom is strained unbearably; hence the late King Abdullah's desire for an "extra-territorial train" from Haifa.

The last time I entered Syria from Beirut, all was well. Two or three truckloads of food-stuffs had been stopped and sent back to Damascus, with the Syrians accusing the Lebanese of "re-exporting" to Israel the food they imported from Syria. But the ban was actually imposed in order to strengthen the Damascus gov-

ernment's hand in its protracted trade negotiations with Lebanon. Passenger traffic, on the other hand, was normal. The Syrian border officials pawed over my passport to make sure it bore no Hebrew inscriptions, poked about in a card index of undesirables that gets bigger after every *coup d'état*, and then I was given my visa.

Coming to Damascus from the West, one travels through bleak, parched foothills that sharpen into cliffs, where they enclose the gorge in which Feisal's troops ambushed the French in 1920. For miles all is desolation. Suddenly thin streaks of green, each tracing a trickle of water, appear on the sun-scorched slopes. Soon a stream appears, racing towards Damascus, then another on the opposite side of the road. Water now spurts from a hundred springs, crevices, and cascades, and the streams become minor torrents lined with a rich uprush of vegetation. Then come cool glades of tall slender trees, a little further on orchards and gardens—and the valley fans out to enfold the Damascus oasis. Nature, elsewhere in this land so austere, seems here to be lavishing all her blessings on one spoiled favorite. To the most blasé Westerner as to the simplest desert Bedu, arrival in Damascus is an unfailing miracle of delight. It is said that the Prophet Mohammed turned back on the outskirts of the oasis, after taking in the splendid sight from a hilltop, so as not to risk seduction by the enchantments of "this earthly paradise." And more than a millennium earlier Naaman the Syrian had exclaimed, in indignant pride: "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the rivers of Israel?"

Yet Damascus never lets one forget the desert is near. The city is dominated by a sullen, sand-colored mountain, Jebel Qasyun, on which the Arabs locate Abel's tomb. However sweetly, coolly Abana and Pharpar croon of contentment, the *jebel*, simmering in the heat haze, looms as a harsh reminder that not very distant, beyond a last dusty clump of trees, gardens end abruptly and the wilderness begins. Life is seen as a frail oasis on the edge of desolation.

SYRIA was the first of the Arab nations to come under the rule of a military man ostensibly acting in the interest of the oppressed masses; more recently, Egypt has followed in its path. RAY ALAN, a British journalist who has written on the Near East for COMMENTARY and various English publications, recently visited Syria; he here reports on three and a half years of army rule in Syria, by three different colonels, and weighs the possibilities for reform under the present Shishakly regime.

MY LEBANESE driver made a detour to take me through a rich new quarter that has sprung up at the base of Jebel Qasyun. The opulent, ostentatious architecture is of the style Beirutis call "hashish baroque," maliciously hinting at a common source for both the architect's inspiration and the owner's wealth. However, as the driver recited what might have been an extract from some Black Baedeker, it became clear that pipe dreams which build Damascus houses are chiefly political. This block belonged to a former finance minister, and that to an ex-premier; these houses were paid for with gold contributed by both sides during Hitler's war, those with gold smuggled from Iraq. . . . In all Near Eastern states, political uncertainty makes real estate the indicated field for investment; but what is elsewhere merely a trend has been transformed in Syria into a stampede by unpredictable military rulers who often cap their contempt for professional politicians and businessmen with socialist-sounding talk.

"The army chiefs," my driver observed, "will be building themselves houses here next, when they've been in power a bit longer." A moment later he added, "I hope you don't have any friends in the Sûreté. . . ."

There were two Sûreté (secret service) men—small, shifty, unshaven—sitting in the lobby of my hotel. If they'd been wearing sandwich boards they couldn't have been more conspicuous. One of them wandered over to the reception desk from time to time to chat with the clerk. The other set out wearily, soon after my arrival, to tail a journalist.

The Sûreté's positive value to any Syrian government is infinitesimal; its contribution to the unpopularity of the present regime is considerable. Almost everyone I met, including government officials, complained and warned about the petty spies and informers that riddled Syrian society and whose own insecurity made them all the more ready to "make something" of the mildest critical remark they overheard. On two previous visits to Syria I had telephoned senior Sûreté officials to whom I had introductions only to learn they were in jail. On this last trip I got the impression that the whole organization has been demoralized, despite the extra funds and recruits that have been poured into it, as a result of internal jealousies and strife deliberately provoked by the military chiefs in order to weaken it vis-à-vis themselves. Whereas the army once mistrusted the Sûreté,

it now treats it with contempt. But the ordinary civilian still has to tread warily. After the fourth military *coup d'état*, scores of over-frivolous citizens were sent to the Mezze internment camp for asking soldiers: "And when are you going to seize power?"

I asked a high-ranking official to sum up his reaction, and that of friends and professional men in his milieu, to the trend of events in Syria. Satisfaction, exhilaration, indifference, disillusionment, or—what? He made sure there was no one outside the door, and that his telephones were disconnected—people really do that in a police state—and then he said, "Fear."

SYRIA's first *coup*, that of Colonel Husni Zaim in March 1949, clipped the claws of the "old gang" of nationalist landlord-politicians who, since the end of the French mandate, had been running the country as if it were their private estate. The coup saved by two hours the life of an officer about to be executed for his part in the sale of a shipload of arms to Israel. The coincidence was almost symbolic, for the army had been angered by the politicians' attempts to blame it for Syria's defeat in Israel. Even in this arms sale scandal, War Minister Sharabati and other civilians, whose responsibility was no less than the condemned officer's, had not been brought to trial. Senior staff officers, furthermore, had been alarmed by reports from authoritative Egyptian and French sources to the effect that President Shukri Kuwatli had secretly agreed with Nuri Pasha Said, the Iraqi premier, on a plan to federate Syria and Iraq under the adolescent King Feisal. Their republican ardor fortified by the conviction that it was better to be a big cock on a small dunghill than a middle-sized rooster on a large one, they closed ranks naturally around Zaim, who was already a malcontent and in danger of dismissal as a result of an administrative dispute with the government.

The army chiefs themselves did not realize how widespread was discontent with the old regime until they had overthrown it. Zaim's unexpected popularity went to his head. Though initiating a number of useful reforms, cleaning up the administration, giving educated women the vote for the first time, and increasing army pay, he established a firm personal hold on the Sûreté, surrounded himself with sycophants, promoted fellow Kurds in preference to Arabs, gave himself the title of Field

Marshal, and showed signs of developing a Goeringesque passion for uniforms and costly baubles.

His first approach to foreign affairs had been promising. He had adopted a friendlier, more realistic attitude towards Israel and Turkey than either his predecessors or his successors found possible. From France, whose Damascus legation had oozed good will in his direction since the eve of the coup, he obtained a twelve-million-dollar credit, some arms, and a guarantee of help against outside attack that still gives old hands at the Quai d'Orsay sleepless nights. American oil men and subsequently State Department officials, pleased with Zaim's speedy ratification of the vital TAP-line agreement, which the nationalist politicians had been sitting on, began to refer to him as the new Ataturk the Arabs so badly needed. Of the Arab League states, Egypt was, shrewdly, the friendliest. But, without due forethought, Zaim allowed King Farouk's flattery to maneuver him into an increasingly violent campaign against the Hashemites (the British-buttressed rulers of Iraq and Jordan who were hoping to build some kind of "Greater Syria" or "Fertile Crescent" union or federation powerful enough to outweigh Egypt in Near Eastern affairs) and, in particular, King Abdullah. This development proved—literally—fatal. Zaim might have survived the mere jealousy of ambitious subordinates and even the rage of the feudal families upon whose political hegemony he had infringed; but Hashemite prestige and persuasiveness—and promises—were able to weld together temporarily two or three mutually mistrustful groups of conspirators. In August 1949 Zaim was thrown out of office and shot by a colleague whom he had especially favored and promoted, Colonel Sami Hinnawi. There was consternation in Paris and Washington; the Egyptian court went into mourning; but King Abdullah, himself soon to die at an assassin's hand, sent Hinnawi and his supporters a message of congratulation.

Hinnawi's reign was even shorter than Zaim's, but long enough for Syria's traditional rulers to climb most of the way back to power. Elections produced a parliament favoring union with Iraq, and Hinnawi and Nuri Pasha arranged a meeting to clinch it. The British Foreign Office's morale, which had been terribly weakened in the Near East during the previous two years, revived for an instant.

Then the sort of thing happened that ought

—like the Portsmouth-treaty tomfoolery, the assassination of King Abdullah, and the recoil of Whitehall's whole Arab League policy—to convince Western officials of the futility of carrying on backstairs intrigue with Near Eastern feudalists. In Bagdad, Nuri's cabinet collapsed and he was forced to resign in favor of a strongly nationalist, anti-British government that denounced the union plan; in Damascus, Sami Hinnawi was arrested and jailed by a group of brother-officers.

SYRIA'S third *coup d'état* was also organized by a colonel, a shy, soft-spoken but blunt man named Adib Shishakly—who, surprisingly, is at the moment of writing still in power. His immediate aim was to thwart the Hashemite union plan, and, like Zaim, he had French support. Shishakly had taken part in the earlier *coups* but had remained, cool and keenly observant, in the background, learning from his tutors' errors. Like Zaim, he had reformist ideas but, like Hinnawi, he despised Zaim's vanity.

Shishakly is shrewder, more evenly balanced, more willing to recognize his own limitations and seek advice, than were his predecessors. He has brought to power with him a number of young men who frankly avow that their dearest aim is to change the whole face, soul, and structure of Syrian society. He would like, or so he says, to put (for the first time) positive ideas rather than negative personalities into the forefront of Syrian politics, but with himself (since he is neither an original nor a profound thinker) acting as a sort of neutral pivot. It is typical of Shishakly that for a long time two of his closest friends and counsellors should have been Akram Horani, leader of the Communist-infiltrated Arab Socialist party (*hesb el-Arabi el Ishteraki*), and Isam Mahairi, leader of the diametrically opposed Syrian National Social party (*hesb el-Qawmi*).

For two full years Shishakly maintained a façade of parliamentarism and left the politicians a fairly free hand, insisting only that the government steer clear of the Hashemites and that the Ministry of Defense—and hence control of the armed forces—be in the hands of his nominee, generally Horani. During these two years the politicians—and in particular the then important People's party (*hesb esh-Shaab*), which held a parliamentary majority—tried hard to devise means of neutralizing the army. By the spring of 1951 Shishakly felt that the situation required him to consolidate

his power, and he resorted to one of the oldest tricks in politics to enable him to do so.

His troops engineered a border clash, murdering seven Israeli policemen in the Huleh valley, where Israel was carrying out an important swamp-clearance and canalization scheme. The French chairman of the local UN armistice-enforcement team, Colonel Bossavy, supported Shishakly loyally, on direct instructions from the Quai d'Orsay, and the matter was referred to the Security Council. No one was more astonished than the Syrian authorities when the American and British representatives on the Council likewise appeared to take their version of the affair seriously. British officials—cynically amused to find themselves toeing a French line on Syria at last—admitted in private that it was considered advisable to give the Syrian military leaders some small measure of satisfaction on what was, after all, a relatively minor issue, in order to strengthen their authority, and thereby Syria's internal stability. It was also thought possible, by British observers on the spot, that Shishakly's border incident might boomerang in favor of Nuri es-Said, now back in office in Iraq and eager as ever for union. This almost came about. The Syrian army's own highly colored stories of Israeli aggression in the Huleh frontier zone—duly played up, though not for reasons the Syrians would have appreciated, by British broadcasts and hand-outs in Arabic—alarmed the volatile Damascene public so much that Shishakly was unable to resist a sly offer by Nuri Pasha of Iraqi "aid." Iraqi air units were dispatched to Syria and stationed there for several weeks during which they checked and supplemented the data the Iraqi intelligence already had on the Syrian armed forces. Then, when the entire Near East was expecting the Iraqis to take Syria over, they were scrupulously withdrawn. Nuri Pasha's prestige in Syria rocketed to an unprecedented high. Advocates of Syrian-Iraqi union began openly canvassing support in Damascus.

THE tension between army and parliament grew. A major disagreement flared up over control of the gendarmerie, the People's party insisting that gendarmes were essentially policemen and should therefore be administered by the civilian **Minister of the Interior**. The military chiefs, fearing the gendarmerie might one day be used against them, demanded that they be placed under the Minister of Defense.

A deadlock ensued that only force could break. At the end of November 1951, Shishakly struck again, shattering the façade he had himself insisted on retaining. Parliament was dissolved and most of the cabinet ministers were imprisoned. First the People's party and then, in the course of the next few months, all other parties were banned. The ineffectual Colonel Fawzi Selo, the army's oldest officer, was installed as "Head of the State."

This fourth *coup* was timed to win the army the maximum of diplomatic good will. The premier Shishakly deposed was Dr. Maarouf ed-Dawalibi, who had publicly called for an Arab alliance with Russia. No American diplomat was likely to lose sleep worrying about what might happen to him—and it was American sympathy, or at least benevolent neutrality, that Shishakly wanted. He already had French support, thoughtfully translated into cash credits and military supplies. The British Foreign Office, for the time being, he could ignore; it was, he knew, far too deeply involved with the Hashemites to risk offending them by making friendly noises at him; but, on the other hand, having burned its fingers so often of late in the Arab cauldron, the Foreign Office would be unlikely to initiate any new policy towards Syria from which Washington and Paris differed appreciably. In the domestic sphere Shishakly decided he had now done with conventional politics and professional politicians: he would give some of his reformist friends their heads.

THE need for and the obstacles to peaceful reform are both great in Syria. Syria is an agricultural country and likely to remain one. A number of factors—among them political uncertainty, the consequent insistence of Syrian capitalists on quick returns, and nationalist hostility to foreign investors—work against industrialization on any appreciable scale. Syria's main asset is her rich, red soil—a considerable asset, but one that rapacity and ignorance are squandering.

Nearly three-quarters of Syria's population of 3,300,000 are fellahin (peasants); of the remainder about 350,000 are stock-raising Bedouins. Big proprietors own around 75 percent of the land. One man may possess as many as thirty or forty villages, their inhabitants as dependent upon him as the donkeys and camels that draw his ploughs. Half, and in some areas more than half, of everything the villagers

produce has to be handed over to the landowner; where he provides seed, equipment, or irrigation he may take as much as 80 percent of the crop. The average Syrian peasant and his family live in permanent fear of eviction—which the landlord can order at a moment's notice, for where contracts exist they are solely for the protection of the owner. A sudden change in local conditions—such as an influx of casual laborers (nomads or refugees)—may oblige him to cede a much bigger share of the crop to his *bey* than is customary lest the latter be tempted to economize at his expense.

Most Syrian landowners are essentially businessmen and speculators. They are not farmers and have nothing in common with the country-loving squires and landed gentry of European feudalism. To take a direct interest in one's acres, and even feel affection for them, would appear to them grotesque. They visit their estates as seldom as possible, generally leaving to sons or agents the collection of their shares of the crops. Revenue from the land is invested in urban real estate and squandered on luxuries and in an ostentatious way of living that contrasts cruelly with the Stone Age existence of the peasants who make it possible.

The peasant lives with his family and animals in a hut of one or two low rooms. In southern Syria it will generally be made of stone, in the north of mud and domed like an igloo; in the river valleys reed huts are common. For the majority of the peasants, sanitation, clean water, medical care, and educational facilities are nonexistent. Malaria, and intestinal, ophthalmic, and venereal diseases are widespread, while undernourishment is the rule: few peasants eat meat more than twice a year, at the festivals Bairam and Id el-Adha, and except in irrigated areas vegetables are a rarely attainable luxury during the long summer and autumn. Winter is an icy inferno of gales and torrential downpours beneath which whole villages of mud hovels may collapse: the only warmth is provided by smoldering, stinking cakes of dung and chaff.

An inquiry made by the British authorities in central Syria in 1944 showed that in five typical villages, containing a total of some 2,500 inhabitants, only eight families were able to do more than satisfy their basic needs. Twenty-four hundred villagers—96 percent of the population—could not even attain a satisfactory level of nutrition, and half of these existed on an income, in money and foodstuffs, that averaged

five dollars a month per head. Peasants in this last category were reduced to eating grass and roots in the winter. A friend of mine who knew the Aleppo region mentioned as typical a feudal estate whose owner gave each family of villagers, as their total share of the year's crops, about fifty dollars in cash, two sacks of wheat, and, for five months of the year, a modest supply of vegetables.

Syria knows no problem of rural overpopulation similar to Egypt's. On the contrary, she is one of the emptiest countries of the East, acre after deserted acre pleading for settlers. Tells, ruins, and dead cities remain as monuments to the teeming population its fertile soil once supported. Of 13,000,000 acres held to be arable, only 5,000,000 are tilled, and more than half of these lie fallow for lack of labor.

RURAL poverty in Syria stems almost entirely from her system of land-ownership and tenancy. Living standards are depressed not only by the direct depredations of the landlords but by the low productivity that results from insecurity of tenure. Fertility and output could be increased in many parts of the country, and erosion reduced, by means (crop rotation, contour plowing, terracing, etc.) immediately within the capabilities of the peasants themselves. But no peasant can feel any incentive to make permanent improvements on land from which he may be evicted, at its owner's whim, from one day to the next, without compensation for such improvement. Besides, the landlord will take the lion's share of any increase in output.

Of the 25 percent of the land not owned by big proprietors, most is owned collectively by the villagers who live on it; but there is generally little effective cooperation among them, or rationalization in its use. Under what is called the *mashaa* system, village land is divided up into family plots that are redistributed by ballot either annually or every three years. Each family scratches away at its particular plot with no thought of making any extra effort to improve it, for by the time that bore fruit another family would be in occupation. Thus discontinuity of tenure under peasant ownership produces the same apathy, neglect, and inefficiency as insecurity of tenure under absentee landlordism. If Syria is to progress both ills must be cured, and the remedy for both—essentially legislative and administrative—lies in the lap of the present military regime. Colonel Shishakly and his colleagues are strong enough

to enforce their will in this sphere, and they can count on a climate of opinion overwhelmingly in favor of reform.

FROM a democratic point of view the present temper of articulate opinion in Syria is extremely dangerous. In Lebanon there is widespread disillusionment with what has passed there for democracy since the end of the French mandate; but Syrian feeling has gone over, beyond mere disillusionment, into outright hostility to democracy. There is a calculated, gleeful "this-will-shock-the-Americans" tone in much of the anti-democratic argument one meets; and Britain and America are, unreasonably, burdened with blame for the failure of the nationalist experiment. "It was bad enough," a senior government official told me, "that you should abandon us in the morass of corruption and misrule that engulfed Syria after the departure of the French; but to try to convince us, in your printed propaganda and broadcasts, that this was democracy was both an insult to our intelligence and a reflection on your own honor." An Army officer said: "For the Western powers to pretend, as they're doing in South Korea as well as the Near East, that democracy is even remotely possible in countries whose populations are mostly illiterate serves only to create the suspicion that you are desirous of utilizing the kind of governments such sham democracy throws up, for your own ends."

At the moment "socialism" is the popular panacea. Every other Syrian one meets describes himself as a "socialist," though the general conception of socialism is Hitlerian and fascist rather than democratic. "Socialist" leanings seem to have become such a mark of political respectability that one is tempted to wonder if there is any connection between this phenomenon and Shishakly's former friendship with Akram Horani of the Arab Socialist party. But even before the fourth *coup d'état*, five of the eight political parties active in Damascus (excluding the illegal but flourishing Communist party) called themselves "socialist"—*ishteraki*—or professed socialistic aims. Most were led by professional politicians of a familiar type, who worked only to further family or sectional interests, and were completely out of touch with the masses for whose welfare they claimed to be campaigning. But the fact that they considered *ishteraki* a sort of magic password to power is significant. Only Horani's

Arab Socialist party, despite its Communistic bias, and the feebly socialist Resurrection party (*hesb el-Ba'ath*) had so much as an elementary grasp of socialist theory: the former favored violent action and was unique in having a peasant following, mainly in the Hama region of central Syria; while the latter addressed itself almost exclusively to "intellectuals." The Socialist Cooperative party (*hesb et-Ta'aouni el-Ishteraki*) numbered in its ranks a few genuine socialists, but as a whole it had unmistakable totalitarian tendencies and its members were required to take an oath of personal loyalty to its leader, Faisal el-Assali.

Officially, all these parties have ceased to exist, but most of them are still as active as their courage allows, jockeying hard in the shadows for a privileged position under the new regime and striving to win individual officers to their cause. Faisal el-Assali—in "voluntary" exile in Beirut—claims that more than 1,500 army officers and noncoms are secretly members of his party. Horani's group has lost ground since incurring the army's displeasure in the spring. Cashing in on his friendship with Shishakly, Horani tried to increase his personal prestige among the peasants by forcing the regime's hand on land reform and other issues. On two or three occasions he sent messages in Shishakly's name to gendarmerie posts out in the steppes, ordering the immediate division of nearby estates among the peasants who worked them. In due course the outraged landowners hastened to the scene, escorted by armed retainers, and clashes ensued. Senior officers complained to the chief of staff that the army's relations with the gendarmerie and powerful notables were being unnecessarily strained by these antics and Horani's rival at Shishakly's elbow, Isam Mahairi, leader of the National Social party (*Qawmi*), not unnaturally chimed in. Shishakly broke with Horani and for a time had him placed under a mild form of house arrest.

Mahairi's National Social party stands for a Mussolini-inspired "corporatism" in internal affairs and an expansionist foreign policy that would create—if necessary, by force—a "natural Syria" including Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel, in that order of priority. This party's growth in Syria is hampered by its Christian and foreign origins—its founder was the late Anton Saadi of Lebanon*—and by the sus-

*Saadi was shot in 1949 on the orders of Premier Riad es-Solh of Lebanon, who was sub-

picion that it may be a tool of British policy: rumors to this effect were first put out in 1945 by the French, who disliked the party and hit on the perfect means of discrediting it. Shishakly was once a member of the *hesb el-Qawmi*, and though he may still have a nostalgic sympathy for its slogans, he is shrewd enough not to jeopardize his position by hitching his chariot to so uncertain a star. In his search for an ideology, however, he has spent much time in discussion with Mahairi—particularly since Akram Horani's fall from grace—and if the present regime lasts long enough, the Syria of the future is more than likely to bear traces of Anton Saadi's warmed-over neo-fascism.

THE proclamations of Syria's new rulers are studiously "progressive"-sounding, even Kremlinesque. In making them so, Shishakly and his advisers have shown their awareness of the popular mood. The men who governed Syria before the army took over are described as "hard-hearted oppressors" and "incompetent, fossilized idols." They are accused of "flagrant abuse of power," of "strengthening feudal oppression" and "tricking the people with useless sophistry in the guise of popular representation." Close behind them in moral turpitude came "the greedy merchants, monopolists, and profiteers . . . whose only aim was to accumulate wealth."

These quotations are from the regime's major policy statement to date, issued over the signature of Fawzi Selo, Shishakly's straw man. It describes the fourth *coup* in these words: "Meanwhile, your [i.e., the Syrian people's] youthful and valiant army, imbued with the true spirit of sacrifice and inspired with a genuine love for the motherland, drawing on your encouragement and on the blood and sweat of your brave children . . . could not remain indifferent to the appeals of the oppressed, but rose like one man in response to the call of duty and, armed with faith and resolution, came to the rescue of the people."

The army's aims? To "take measures necessary for the realization of the social aspirations of a free and progressive people . . . to work for the transformation of Syria into a modern and progressive country in which there shall

sequently assassinated by a *Qawmi* execution squad. The party is still banned in Lebanon, but in the last year has resumed its activities, almost openly, throughout that country.

be no master and no slave but absolute justice and assured freedom."

Soon after the fourth *coup* a decree was issued abolishing titles—"an evil heritage from dark periods of our history." The government's own civil servants, entitled, according to their grade, to be addressed as *bey* or *effendi*, were the first to ignore it, for they wanted to retain at least a little formal standing vis-à-vis the military directors-general installed in all departments of the administration. Their example is now generally followed, and no private citizen in his right mind would dream of addressing a government official or notable with merely *sayyed* (mister).

In other spheres Shishakly's efforts at reform have been more successful. Merchants and other businessmen are now keeping accounts and paying direct taxes for the first time. The administration is cleaner and more efficient than ever before. Internal security is good and fewer arms are in private hands: feudal landowners and tribal chiefs, though still powerful, are no longer a law unto themselves. A step has been taken in the direction of land reform with the distribution among needy peasants of areas of the state domain which had in the past been illegally annexed by big landowners.

Of late, the army chiefs' reformist ardor seems, however, to have cooled. Clashes on the land, in areas where landowners sought to frustrate reform, alarmed some of the older officers, who—according to an eminent politician of their generation, who told me he had received worried approaches from them—are obsessed with a nagging desire for "legality" and a fear of being judged one day as mutineers. They cannot wholly convince themselves that Shishakly's new order has come to stay. He, of course, is supremely confident, but so was Zaim. . . .

Shishakly himself now favors a more cautious approach to land reform and other critical problems, at least until Syria's financial future can be seen in a clearer light. An attempt to expand cotton production for export, and thereby increase the country's revenue, was thwarted by the landowners' greed for big profits (they were, for example, unwilling to spend money even on preparing the ground and protecting the crop)—and Shishakly is now looking, tentatively, for dollar aid. He is not very hopeful, since, to avoid undue risk of internal upheaval, such aid must be free from strings and above all must not be made conditional upon Syria's joining the unpopular

"Middle East Command," should it ever be established. For the time being, however, he apparently feels it would frighten Washington unnecessarily were he to appear fanatically fond of social change—which might suggest that he was still under the influence of Horani. The progressive declarations continue to be churned out, but they are beginning to have a hollow sound.

FRANCE is still the Shishakly regime's only firm friend, but her help is almost exclusively military.* The Syrian armed forces have been strengthened with French-supplied Sherman tanks, armored cars, and light aircraft, although highly placed Syrians complain, inevitably perhaps, that the government is paying an extortionate price for them, docked from credits originally advanced to strengthen the currency.

More than a hundred German officers and noncoms have been hired to train and advise the Syrian forces. Soon after their arrival they split socially and politically into Wehrmacht and Nazi factions; the former had their way and secured the return to Germany or relegation to secondary duties of the more obstreperous Nazi diehards. There is also an undoubted Communist element—mainly from Munich—entrenched in the Wehrmacht camp. The position of the Germans in Damascus is delicate and at times ludicrous. They tend unanimously, for "racial" and other reasons, to despise their Syrian masters, yet must accept countless humiliations from them; Syrian officers, for their part, consider it politic occasionally to remind these ex-invincibles of their mercenary status and have frequently rejected sound advice for no other reason than to stress this. The Germans aroused Syrian resentment when they first arrived by giving their advice in tones of command; but today their manner is rarely forceful—they have settled down half-heartedly into a rut of routine, concerned only to hold down their jobs with a minimum of fuss and effort until the Wehrmacht has a niche for them again.

The Syrian army has been swollen by conscription, which for the first time is reaching the sons of the wealthy as well as of the hap-

less fellahin, but political and administrative power has undoubtedly softened its officer corps. "Our officers have never been so pampered," I was told by a leading political personality—one of the few still in the army's confidence—and a second politician added: "Or so flabby!" They piled up reasons. "Too many American cars (which are eating up dollars that ought to be buying tractors), too many privileges and unaccustomed luxuries, too many soft office jobs. . . ." There were dark and no doubt envious murmurs, in this and other political salons, about large sums allegedly being drawn from army funds and salted away for the private needs of individual staff officers. The army, it seemed, had contracted the very disease against which it had waged so successful a campaign within the civil administration.

Why is Shishakly trying to build a bigger army? Self-glorification and the Arabic equivalent of "jobs for the boys" were among the politicians' answers. "To persuade us to underwrite his regime and supply economic aid," a Western diplomat thought. An army spokesman told me: "For defense, primarily, against Israel; but also possibly—who knows?—against Iraq." Syria, he assured me, would never attack Israel. "We consider ourselves bound by the Rhodes agreement and, privately, we recognize that Israel has come to stay. But there are extremists in Israel who might decide on aggression against an Arab neighbor in order to overcome economic difficulties at home. . . ." Unlike Zaim, Shishakly is not in the least inclined to try swimming against the mainstream of public opinion by seeking an accommodation with Israel, and he is sufficiently practical a politician to realize the value of Israel as a sort of bogeyman that can be conjured up at will on the Huleh frontier. However, between the purely opiate expediency of an anti-Jewish stance and the suicide of a renewed attempt to invade Israel, lies a slope down which the dictator has no intention of slithering. This is not to say that there is no danger of events pushing him, and suitably changed conditions, such as substantial Western arms shipments to Syria under the mistaken impression that the Syrian army might thereby be persuaded to resist Russian invasion, would undoubtedly increase the willingness of Shishakly and his entourage to risk a descent into recklessness. (However, Shishakly has recently announced his willingness to cooperate fully with UNRWA in resettling Arab refugees, thus admitting in effect that they cannot be re-

*Syria is now also purchasing small quantities of jet-fighter aircraft from England. The Foreign Office recently announced that all Near Eastern states would be allowed to buy British jets.

patriated. He is the first Arab leader to do so.

Syrian relations with Iraq at the time of writing are very bad. Shishakly knows that more than one former nationalist Syrian politician and many Syrian merchants, businessmen, and landowners look to Iraq for possible "liberation" from army rule: it is, of course, taxation and loss of political power and personal influence, rather than any sudden concern for democratic principles, that underlies their despair. Possibly the new military government that has taken power in Iraq is less interested than previous ones in pushing the long-lived Hashemite designs.

ALLIED with the professional politicians and tax-shy rich in mute opposition to the military regime, are several formerly influential Moslem dignitaries and individual traditionalists who are appalled by Shishakly's obvious contempt for Islamic conventions. The dictator and his colleagues give highly alcoholic parties, dance in the capital's few night clubs, and are frequently seen, even in broad daylight, consorting with unveiled women. Two of Shishakly's first acts after his assumption of full power were to "advise" the leader of the Syrian branch of the Moslem Brotherhood to leave the country, and to clamp down on the numerous phony sheikhs, bogus descendants of the Prophet, and other self-styled holy men with whom Syria, like all Moslem states except Turkey, was infested. Only officially recognized dignitaries are now permitted to wear religious robes and turbans and even they are liable to instant arrest if they are heard talking politics or seen in a bar or café. (One venerable Syrian holy man I used to know was addicted to whiskey, which he daringly drank in public, in his favorite restaurant, every evening—served in a teapot!)

Syrian Christians are grateful to Shishakly for his efforts to curb Moslem extremism. Although many of them were strongly critical of other aspects of the army's policy, they told me that as a community they had never felt more secure. The position of the few remaining Jews seems, similarly, to have improved. There is less general anti-Jewish discrimination than under the "old gang," though Jews found in the "frontier area"—most elastic of terms—are liable to execution. The ban on emigration to Israel has never been lifted in Syria, but most members of the ancient Jewish communities of Damascus and Aleppo seem to have spirited them-

selves away, mainly through Lebanon. Their departure has had a disproportionately disastrous effect on the standard of workmanship in crafts generally considered "typically Syrian." A particularly fine type of inlaid brasswork I tried to find was no longer obtainable. "The people who make it," said one merchant sadly, "are now in Israel. Tel Aviv will soon be putting Damascus out of business."

A senior officer admitted that the departure of the Jews was a loss for the country. "But we're going to try to tempt some of them back," he went on, laughing. "We're broadcasting a regular propaganda feature in Hebrew—there are one or two Arab refugees here who speak it—directed to Syrian and Iraqi Jews in Israel. I doubt if we shall succeed in persuading any of our former citizens to quit Israel but we might be able to make a bit of trouble over there."

Syrian journalists like to tell visiting Westerners how bitterly they resent the army's handling of the press—and editors do indeed tremble on the way to their offices every morning for fear of finding a message ordering them to suspend publication. Journalists are also interned or deported from time to time. But the Syrian press is still as venal as ever—there is, at most, only one paper in Damascus which supports itself without bribes and subsidies—and the military chiefs are at least half sincere when they declare that they hope, by treating the press so roughly, to clean it up a little. The three Western powers and, to a lesser extent, Russia, all buy editorial space in Syrian papers. The old-fashioned way was to pay an editor to publish a given article. Early this year the army forbade this practice. The U. S. Information Office was the first to find a legal way out, by buying "re-publication rights" to material it had itself provided or inspired! Needless to say, such a system defeats itself, for the more subsidies papers receive the more they want; and it is not unusual to see strongly anti-Communist and violently anti-Western articles alternate in the same paper day after day. Moreover, knowing about this system, the newspaper readers have become so cynical that they suspect that even good, honest "hard" news—of, say, Western successes in Korea—may have been paid for, too, and dismiss it as propaganda if it appears too favorable to the West. Pro-Russian items tend to be less suspect, since Russia makes much less use of the press in this way; she does not even maintain an information officer in Damascus.

SHISHAKLY can afford to take the risk of alienating journalists, Moslem conservatives, professional politicians, and other self-centered groups, provided he retains his hold on the army and on the masses. He realizes that if, one day, he is overthrown, it will, most probably be by another military putsch. Hence his lavish pampering of all ranks. The masses are a less direct danger, though their political awareness is maturing rapidly and it would be uncomfortable ruling against them. The slowing down of the tempo of reform and the rising cost of living have cost Shishakly much of the popular good will he once enjoyed, but there are as yet no signs of any popular defection.

The Syrian Communist party—still illegal, of course—is far less active under Shishakly than under the nationalists. Its leader, Khaled Begdash, Moscow's candidate for the gauleiter-ship of "Free Kurdistan," is rarely seen in public but receives a fair number of visitors in his

"underground" residence—any taxi will take you there—in the Kurdish quarter of Damascus, on the same slope, at the foot of Jebel Qasyun, as the lavish new "hashish baroque" villas. Other members of the Communist hierarchy squat unobtrusively on the fringe of public life, alert and well informed, observing a kind of political truce and waiting for the military regime to lose its sense of direction and mess things up.

It is the knowledge that the alternatives to army rule have by now been so drastically reduced that reconciles many Syrians of the literate classes, who privately dislike or fear Shishakly and his *junta*, to his regime. The complaints one hears about the military authorities are numerous and legitimate. But only those who had a vested interest in it would wish the pre-Zaim nationalist set-up to return. "Anything," say Syrians of all classes "would be better than that—*anything*."

WORDS HAVING HOLINESS

ELI SIEGEL

MAY His great name
Be mighty and holy
In the world
His will has made.
May this be with speed,
And in a near time.
Amen.

May His kingdom
Come to be
In your life, your days,
And in the life
Of the House of Israel:
May this be with speed,
And in a near time.
Amen.

May His great name be blessed
For ever, for ever.

Blessed, praised, made glorious;
Extolled, heightened, and honored,
Made mighty and lifted up—

Be the name of the Holy and One,
Whom we bless;
Even though He is high
Above all blessings and hymns,
Extollings and comfortings:
All that are uttered
In the world.
And say ye,
Amen.

May peace come from on high,
Opulently;
And life for us,
And for all Israel.
And say ye,
Amen.

May He who makes peace
In His high places,
Make peace for us,
And for all Israel.
And say ye,
Amen.

"WORDS HAVING HOLINESS" is a translation of the Kaddish, the traditional Hebrew prayer for the dead. ELI SIEGEL has contributed to the *Nation*, *Scribner's*, *Hound and Horn*, and numerous other periodicals.